

Looking Into The Children's Eyes: The Experiences Of Offspring In Parental Separation

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Abstract:

Parental separation profoundly impacts children's emotional, psychological, and social well-being. While most research focuses on its aftermath, few studies examine how pre-separation experiences shape short- and long-term effects. This study explores the lived experiences of adults who witnessed parental separation during their transition stage from childhood to adolescence. Using a phenomenological approach, six (6) participants from Batangas Province were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using the modified Colaizzi method. Findings reveal that pre-separation experiences fall into two categories: constant exposure to parental conflicts or a perceived sense of normalcy. Witnessing frequent disputes, parental irresponsibility, and infidelity led to embarrassment, withdrawal, and emotional suppression, while those shielded from conflicts developed a false sense of security that later affected their coping mechanisms. Post-separation effects included economic instability, premature role shifts, and family fragmentation. Participants faced financial burdens, educational disruptions, and sibling separation, contributing to emotional distress, biased perceptions against one parent, rebellion, and reconciliation fantasies. Some, however, reported a sense of relief from reduced parental conflict. Long-term effects varied: those exposed to conflict often experienced unresolved resentment, relationship difficulties, and internalized negative self-beliefs, while others showed positive adaptation and growth. However, a key finding is that none of the participants achieved full healing, as emotional scars persist into adulthood. To address these challenges, the *Healing through Integrative Life-Oriented Method (HILOM)* Program was developed to foster emotional recovery, self-awareness, and resilience.

Keywords: long-term Effects of Separation; offspring experiences; post-parental separation; pre-parental separation; short-term effects of separation

1) INTRODUCTION:

The family unit is a cornerstone of Filipino culture, providing emotional security, identity, and social stability. Beyond its traditional role, it serves as the foundation for children's psychological and emotional development. However, the traditional notion of family is increasingly challenged by social dynamics, particularly the rising rates of parental separation despite the absence of a divorce law in the Philippines. While the dissolution of a marriage directly impacts parents, it is often the children who bear the deepest emotional and psychological burdens, navigating the complexities of family disruption during their formative years. The transition from childhood to adolescence is a critical developmental stage requiring active parental guidance and support. However, for many children, this foundation is compromised by parental separation. Research suggests that this stage is particularly vulnerable, as they are old enough to remember family stability but lack the emotional maturity to fully process conflict and separation.

Different studies indicate that children from separated families face a heightened risk of anxiety, depression, academic struggles, and even suicidal ideation. [2] found that adolescents from broken families, experience emotional setbacks, acts of rebellion, changes in interpersonal relationships. Similarly, [6] found that parental separation can lead to persistent mental health issues into adulthood, increasing the risk of suicide, fragile marital relationships, and criminal tendencies. [5] further confirmed that mental health problems among children after parental separation.

Parental separation also affects social relationships and family dynamics. [3] indicated that children struggled with feelings of loss, divided loyalty, and a longing for stability. Many felt as though they were living in "two worlds," torn between their parents. Similarly, [1] reported that while some children coped effectively with their parents' separation, others experienced embarrassment and indifference toward marriage. On the other hand, not all children respond to parental separation in the same way. [4] examined how parent-child relationship quality moderates the effects of separation. The study found that children who had frequent conflicts with their resident parent exhibited more significant emotional problems, while those who maintained a positive relationship with their primary caregiver adjusted more effectively post-separation.

Despite these well-documented risks, the nuanced experiences of children before, during, and after parental separation remain underexplored. Understanding these early experiences is essential, as they shape children's immediate emotional responses—such as withdrawal, denial, or relief—and influence long-term psychological outcomes. Existing literature has largely focused on resilience and support systems, yet many children mask deeper vulnerabilities behind a facade of normalcy. Examining pre-separation experiences, which range from high parental conflict to perceived stability, can provide insight into the diverse emotional and behavioral responses observed post-separation. Identifying these patterns may help predict which children are most at risk for long-term distress and guide the development of targeted interventions.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill these gaps by exploring the lived experiences of individuals who witnessed parental separation during a critical developmental stage of their lives. By examining both pre- and post-separation experiences, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how parental separation shapes emotional responses, self-perceptions, and long-term psychological well-being. Using a phenomenological approach, this study captures the personal narratives of individuals who have navigated these challenges, shedding light on their coping mechanisms, struggles, and potential for resilience. Additionally, this research will identify key support systems and interventions that can help to adults who experienced parental separation during their transition from childhood to adolescence.

2) METHODS AND METHODOLOGY:

This study utilized the qualitative research method, specifically the descriptive phenomenological analysis. It intended to gain in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and to capture the lived experiences of adolescents who have separated parents. It utilized purposive sampling to select participants who met the following criteria: (1) Filipino citizens residing in Batangas Province, (2) 18 years old and above, and (3) experienced parental separation during their transition age from childhood to adolescence, a stage where children begin to develop a deeper understanding of relationships, identity, and emotional regulation. A semi-structured interview utilizing open-ended questions was employed to allow maximum sharing of the participants regarding their personal experience in the separation of their parents. The instrument was validated by three (3) experts in the field of psychology and research. For its final form, four questions were created to explore and describe the experiences of offspring in pre and post-parental separation stages. On the other hand, two questions were created to help analyze how the encountered situations influenced the participants' lives. A modified Colaizzi method was used to analyze the obtained data to ensure the credibility and reliability of its results.

Finally, ethical considerations were strictly observed in accordance with the Psychological Association of the Philippines' (PAP) Code of Ethics.

3) RESULTS:

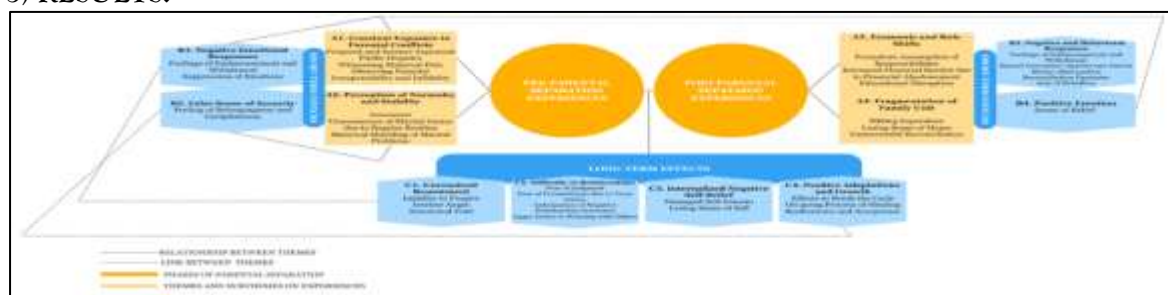


Figure 1: The Experiences and Effects of Parental Separation to Offspring

Figure 1 presents the experiences and effects of parental separation to offspring. The pre-separation phase is characterized by two primary experiences: (A1) constant exposure to parental conflicts and (A2) perception of normalcy and stability. Many children witness frequent and intense arguments, public disputes, and parental irresponsibility or infidelity, leading to (B1) negative emotional responses, such as feelings of embarrassment, withdrawal, and suppression of emotions. However, those children who perceive normalcy and stability develop (B2) false sense of security, remaining unaware of marital issues due to innocence, unawareness of marital issues due to the predictability of daily routines and maternal shielding of marital problems. This phase plays a crucial role in how children process and internalize the eventual separation.

Following parental separation, offspring experience (A3) significant changes in economic roles and family dynamics. This phase often leads to a premature assumption of responsibilities, increased financial burden due to financial abandonment and educational disruption. Additionally, (A4) fragmentation within the family occurs when individuals are separated from their siblings, leading to a loss of their sense of home and resulting in unsuccessful attempts of reconciliation.

Consequently, these post-separation experiences contribute to (B3) short-term emotional and behavioral responses, including feelings of embarrassment, withdrawal, and biased perceptions against one parent. Some children engage in acts of rebellion or develop reconciliation fantasies, hoping for a restored family unit. On the contrary, others experience (B4) positive emotion, specifically a sense of relief, particularly if separation reduces household conflicts.

Over time, the long-term effects of parental separation become evident, with the pre-separation phase playing a fundamental role in shaping these outcomes. Individuals who struggled with negative emotional responses in childhood may carry (C1) unresolved resentment, marked by inability to forgive, intense anger and emotional void. More so, others develop (C2) difficulties in relationships as they are struggling with fear of commitment, trust issues, anticipation of negative expectations regarding relationship outcomes and anger issues in relating with others. Additionally, some have already (C3) internalized their negative self-belief as manifested by their damaged self-esteem and lost sense of self.

Despite these challenges, not all outcomes are negative. Some individuals—especially those who once had a false sense of security during the pre-separation phase—demonstrate (C4) positive adaptation and growth. They actively work to break negative cycles, engage in healing, and eventually reach acceptance of their experiences.

However, a key finding is that none of the participants achieved full healing, as emotional scars persist into adulthood. While some have made progress in understanding and coping with their past, the effects of parental separation continue to shape their emotional well-being, relationships, and self-perception. This suggests that the impact of parental separation is a lifelong process, requiring continuous efforts in self-awareness, emotional regulation, and healing.

Pre-Parental Separation and its Short-Term Effects. The pre-separation phase in participants' lives was marked by a dichotomy of experiences: some experienced frequent parental conflicts, while others perceived their family environment as stable due to parental shielding.

The exposure to conflicts, including public disputes, witnessing maternal distress, and parental irresponsibility, led to deep-seated emotional responses such as embarrassment, withdrawal, and emotional suppression.

Conversely, participants who perceived stability before separation often recalled moments of familial bliss, routine, and a false sense of security. Their experiences suggest that the lack of awareness of marital discord shielded them from immediate distress but made the eventual separation more disruptive.

The findings highlight the significance of early family experiences in shaping children's emotional well-being, emphasizing the crucial role of parental behavior and conflict management in mitigating long-term psychological effects.

Post-Parental Separation Experiences and its Short Term Effects. As the participants navigate into the life after their parents separation, they recall how they had to experience shifts in economics and roles following their parents' separation, characterized by increased financial burden due to financial abandonment, premature assumption of responsibilities, and educational disruption.

Truly, financial instability was a significant challenge, particularly when one parent did not fulfill their financial obligations. The increased financial burden placed on the remaining parent and, indirectly, on the children underscores the economic difficulties that often accompany parental separation.

More so, the post-experience also highlights the experiences of the participants as they had to be separated from their siblings, losing their sense of home, and unsuccessful reconciliation. Sibling separation was another common experience for them, often due to custody arrangements or economic pressures. This separation exacerbated feelings of loss and instability, as siblings often serve as a crucial support system during such transitions.

As the participants navigate into the life after their parents separation, they further recall being subjected to both negative and positive effects of the separation characterized by embarrassment and social withdrawal, biased perception against the father, blame other parties, and acts of Rebellion, and on the positive note, a sense of Relief.

The negative emotional and behavioral responses recalled by the participants during the post-parental separation are deeply intertwined with their perceptions and experiences of the family breakdown. These responses reflect the complex ways in which they cope with and adapt to the significant changes in their family dynamics.

The post-parental separation experiences of children highlight the multifaceted challenges they face, spanning financial difficulties, familial disruptions, emotional distress, and social stigmas. While many encountered severe struggles ranging from economic instability to loss of familial bonds others found solace in the end of parental conflict. These narratives underscore the importance of support systems and targeted interventions to assist children in navigating the complexities of life after parental separation. Understanding these effects can inform policies and psychological support frameworks that foster resilience and healing in affected individuals.

Long-term Effects of Parental Separation. Witnessing parents move into separate lives, regardless of the timing and circumstances, is profoundly painful and leaves an indelible mark on the minds and development of children, potentially leaving scars that persist into their adulthood. The narratives of the participants underscores the deep and lasting impacts of parental separation on various aspects of individuals' lives, from unresolved emotional pain and relationship difficulties to internalized negative self-beliefs. Despite these challenges, it also highlights the potential for positive adaptation and growth, emphasizing efforts to break the cycle, ongoing healing processes, and the realization and acceptance of life's complexities.

Intervention Program. Based on the results of the study, it is evident that the participants are still in the process of healing. None of them have totally healed yet from the pain and scars of dealing with their family disintegration. Thus, the **Healing through Integrative Life-Oriented Method (HILOM)** Program was designed. This program aims to address these realities to adults who experienced parental separation during their transition from childhood to adolescence. *Hilom*, a Tagalog word which means healing or to heal, seeks to give a resounding message that despite the complexities and challenges of the healing process, with willingness to commit in the process coupled with a genuine support system, *pagHILOM*, although can be blurry at first, is possible.

HILOM is composed of a five-step process aimed to facilitate healing among adults who experienced parental separation during their transition from childhood to adolescence

1. Hope

In this stage, hope will be ignited among adults who experienced parental separation during their transition from childhood to adolescence. Through guided support and compassionate engagement, they will be able to acknowledge and process the emotional impact of their past. By creating a safe and understanding space, participants will be encouraged to shift their perspective, move beyond unresolved pain and resistance, and embrace the possibility of healing. This newfound sense of hope reduces the emotional burden of denial and internal conflict, ultimately paving the way for personal growth and transformation.

2. Identity Construction

With hope as a foundation, individuals can reframe their experience of parental separation as an opportunity for self-discovery and personal development. By processing their past, they can redefine their sense of self, cultivate self-belief, and establish a stronger, more resilient identity—key elements in healing from childhood separation trauma.

3. Love and Acceptance

As individuals develop a well-defined sense of identity, they gain a deeper understanding of their values, needs, and self-worth. This clarity fosters authenticity and self-acceptance, allowing them to engage in relationships where they feel respected and valued. By embracing both self-love and acceptance, they learn

to accept their past experiences without judgment, creating space for emotional healing. This acceptance of themselves and their journey enables healthier connections with others, reinforcing their sense of worth and promoting long-term personal growth.

4. Open Support System

After going through the previous processes, they become more open to forming meaningful relationships. With a stronger sense of self and emotional resilience, participants will be better equipped to express their true emotions and vulnerabilities. This newfound openness enables them to become a source of support for others who have experienced similar struggles. By sharing their journey, they inspire and uplift others, creating a cycle of healing and emotional well-being that extends beyond their own growth.

5. Maintenance

After integrating the previous stages, long-term healing is reinforced through mindfulness and intentional self-care. By focusing on the present and consistently applying the lessons from their journey, individuals can prevent being overwhelmed by past experiences. This ongoing effort helps sustain their resilience, ensuring continued personal growth, well-being, and the ability to thrive emotionally in daily life.

4] CONCLUSION:

Overall, the current study was able to identify patterns from the narratives of the participants regarding the impact of their parental separation. Participants who were exposed to parental conflicts during the pre-separation phase were more inclined to experience negative short-term effects. In contrast, those who perceived normalcy and stability in their family, despite common misunderstandings, still felt a sense of belongingness and completeness within the family unit. Both groups of participants, regardless of their pre-separation experiences, experienced short-term negative emotional responses post-separation. However, only those who were exposed to conflict found post-separation to be a relief, as it marked the end of parental disputes, while those who perceived stability often went into denial, harboring reconciliation fantasies.

In terms of long-term effects, all participants had to navigate the aftermath of separation. However, the nature of these impacts varied. Those exposed to conflict were more likely to harbor unresolved resentments as adults, facing difficulties in forming and maintaining healthy relationships. On the other hand, those who perceived stability pre-separation were more likely to embrace positive adaptations and personal growth. Despite these varying experiences, none of the participants have completely healed from the separation, even if it occurred years ago, indicating persistent emotional scars and psychological impacts that profoundly influence their adult lives.

From the thorough examination of the participants' experiences, it can be deduced that separation from people you love, whenever and however it happens, is painful and leaves an indelible scar on one's mind and development. It has accompanying risks that can be measured. But none is as basic and universal as the separation itself.

The HILOM program, developed based on the results of this study, is designed to address the unique needs of adults who experienced parental separation during their transition from childhood to adolescence.

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7] Data Availability: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

8] Conflict of interest: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest".

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